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AUTHOR Peterson, Sharyl Bender
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ABSTRACT

This guide, which was developed by a college career center, is designed to answer some common questions about the process of applying to graduate school. The following topics are covered: graduate schools versus professional schools; differences between graduate and undergraduate school; considerations in deciding whether/when to attend graduate school; steps in selecting the right school and determining which/how many schools to apply to; criteria for choosing a program; program costs and sources of financial support; and ins and outs of the application and admissions process (the general process, graduate admissions criteria, application essays, required tests, letters of recommendation, deadlines, strategies for dealing with rejection, and the importance of gathering information as soon as possible). Appended are a list of questions and issues to explore, a chart to list characteristics of programs under consideration, sources from which samples of major standardized graduate school admissions tests can be ordered, and a list of 24 related resources. (MN)

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Career Center

Applying to Graduate School

ED 363 720

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Written and compiled by Sharyl Bender Peterson, Research & Resources Coordinator, The Career Center, March, 1993

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

INTRODUCTION

You are probably reading this because you are thinking about continuing your education after leaving Colorado College. Common concerns of students who are considering further educational pursuits include questions like:

- How do you decide whether to go to graduate school?
- If you decide to go, should you go as soon as you finish your degree at C.C., or should you wait for awhile? If you wait, will you ever go?
- If you decide to go, how do you choose which school to attend? How do you find out about schools that you may be interested in?
- If you decide to apply, what are all the things you need to do to increase the likelihood of being accepted to a program you'll like?
- What if no-one will admit you? What if lots of good schools do admit you -- how do you choose between them?

The purpose of this booklet is to answer some of those questions directly, and to suggest other ways you can go about finding the information you need. At the end of this booklet, in Appendix A, there are lists of questions that you should explore, and suggestions for how to go about getting your questions answered. Appendix B contains a checklist that will help you in the decision-making process; it is provided to help you compare programs while making graduate school decisions. It is important to remember that like all other career development activities, the responsibility will be on you to get the job done! Only you can (with a little help) figure out exactly what your questions are, seek out the answers to those questions, and make the best decisions regarding your own future.

"GRADUATE SCHOOLS" VS. "PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS"

Before you continue reading this booklet, you should know that there is a technical distinction between "graduate schools" and "professional schools." Typically, "professional schools" are considered to include schools of medicine, law, dentistry, veterinary medicine, engineering, architecture, and several other specialized fields. "Graduate school" is the term used to refer to most other types of post-undergraduate programs -- for example, programs in psychology, history, art, etc. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term "graduate school" throughout this booklet, recognizing that most of the issues involved in decision-making are similar whether you are considering a Master's degree in Sociology, or an M.D. program.

GRADUATE SCHOOL IS NOT LIKE UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL

Many students decide to go on to graduate school because they are pretty comfortable with the academic routine, and typically enjoy it. Sometimes students make the decision to go on because they are uncertain about what they "really want to do" in terms of a career, or because going to graduate school appears easier than getting a job. After all, everyone has heard how bad the job market is -- surely it makes more sense to keep going to school.

Unfortunately, this kind of decision-making is based on several incorrect beliefs -- including the belief that graduate school is pretty much like undergraduate school. The reality is that graduate school differs from undergraduate school in many ways. These include:

Focus

Graduate studies in any field are much more tightly focussed around a specific academic discipline than undergraduate studies ever are. Even if you did a thesis at C.C., which typically represents a very high degree of focus on a topic, that thesis work only presented a faint taste of the concentration in a discipline that is represented by graduate work. Thus, it is pretty important that you both deeply love your chosen field of study and are committed to working on it night and day for an extended period of time.

How You Allocate Your Time

Your day-to-day life in graduate school will probably be very different from the kind of life you have enjoyed as a C.C. student. While as an undergraduate you may have spent considerable time and energy hanging out with friends or partying, there is little or no time to do that in graduate school. Your energies will need to be focussed almost entirely on your academic work, and there may be little energy left for recreation. While there may be some recreational opportunities available, your chief activity and focus must be -- if you are going to succeed -- on the graduate program.

Personal/Family Needs

If you have or are anticipating having a family at the same time you will be in school, it is important to recognize how difficult it may be to negotiate all of your needs simultaneously. At the graduate level, there is usually little or no institutional concern for your personal difficulties, and the level of support for your problems that you may have come to expect as an undergraduate will simply not be available to you as a graduate student.

GRADUATE SCHOOL AND YOU – A LITTLE SELF-ASSESSMENT

As is the case with all career planning, before deciding whether to go to graduate school you need to take a careful look at yourself -- we call that "self-assessment." Before you can identify the graduate program that is right for you, it is first necessary to identify "you." This will help you make much better decisions about whether, when, where, and how you will pursue graduate work. What we mean by "identifying yourself" or "self-assessment" is taking a careful look at aspects of yourself that may have a bearing on graduate endeavors. To do this thoroughly, you can use another of our Career Center booklets, "Self-Directed Self-Assessment," and/or attend the Career Center workshop, "Finding a Career With Your Name On It: Self-Assessment." You also need to be able to answer the questions in Appendix A of this booklet under "A Little Self-Assessment." Basically, you need to identify your own strengths and weaknesses, as well as your present interests, skills, values, goals and objectives, and how all of those things relate to the possibility of going to graduate school.

It is particularly important to think about how graduate school will help you meet your career goals. If you aren't sure about that, you may need to think further about what your goals are. It isn't unusual for undergraduates to be somewhat unsure about "what do I want to do with my life?" Before investing a lot of time, energy, and money in graduate school, you need to be fairly clear about what you hope to accomplish with your life (at least for the next five years or so). Only if you know what your goals are can you determine whether or not graduate work is likely to help you meet those goals.

SHOULD I GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

As you self-assess, you will be focussing on questions having to do with why you should or shouldn't go to graduate school. When asked this question, the answers people give vary, depending on each person's particular goals. However, some common answers include:

Preparing for a Profession

Many people do enter graduate schools -- particularly professional schools -- to prepare themselves for specific types of professions. For example, if you wish to be a pediatrician or a surgeon, the only way to obtain the appropriate training and qualifications is to go to medical school. Similarly, if you wish to become a trial lawyer or a corporate attorney, you must complete a law degree. And, if you want to become a college or university professor, you will need at least a Master's degree, and more probably a Ph.D.

For many other career fields, however, a graduate degree is not necessarily required. Students often mistakenly assume that you "have to have" a graduate degree to engage in many professions, when the fact is that while such a degree might enhance your marketability and your salary, it may well not be necessary. The only way to find out is to do some serious career exploration, determine what kinds of career areas you wish to pursue, and what kinds of qualifications (including degrees) are required to do so.

Getting a Job

It is also important to realize that completing a graduate degree is not a guarantee of a particular job or career. While holding a Ph.D. will certainly enhance your chances of getting a job as a math professor, for example, and is more-or-less required if you wish to be a math professor at a liberal arts college like C.C., it does not guarantee that you will be able to obtain such employment. As another example, while you cannot legally practice law in the U.S. without completing appropriate legal training, simply having a law degree does not guarantee you a job as an attorney. Actually getting particular jobs depends on many things, including the state of the economy at the time you are job seeking, the number and qualifications of people with whom you are competing for positions, the number of positions available, and a variety of other factors.

Earning More

Similarly, if your goal in attending graduate school is only to enhance your future earning capability, you need to think again. People with graduate degrees do, on average, earn more than people who don't have such degrees, on average, but when you take into account the many other variables that are part of reality -- motivation, work experience, opportunities, realities of the market, etc. -- simply having a graduate degree does not guarantee you any higher earnings. So, if your goal in going to graduate school is to guarantee yourself a job upon graduation, and/or to guarantee higher earnings, those expectations may be unrealistic, and you need to determine whether your other goals are sufficiently motivating that you still wish to seek a graduate degree.

Personal Achievement

A final motivator for many people in going to graduate school has to do with gaining personal satisfaction. Many of us see ourselves as "life-long students," and are never happier than when we are in a setting that allows us to exercise our intellect and academic abilities. Generally, people who derive pleasure and satisfaction from academic pursuits, and who have a clear sense of their career goals and how graduate education meshes with those goals, are more likely to enjoy and be successful at their graduate studies.

WHEN SHOULD I GO?

If you decide that you do want to pursue further education after leaving C.C., you will also need to decide when the best time is to do that. It is important to remember that there are no absolute guidelines about when a person should go to graduate school.

WHY NOT NOW?

It may seem easier to go directly on after completing your bachelor's degree, both because much of what you have learned as an undergraduate is still fairly fresh in your mind, and because it may seem easier to get information about grad schools while still on campus. It may also be easier to get recommendations from faculty while you are still fresh on their minds. And, some advanced programs do prefer to recruit students directly from undergraduate programs.

However, that last trend is very much on the downswing nationally -- many graduate and professional schools are beginning to show admissions preferences to candidates who have had some life/work experiences on which to build a well-thought-out graduate school plan and career. Working full-time for a few years before attending graduate school gives you more knowledge and experience on which to base your decisions about graduate school.

CONSIDER WAITING A LITTLE WHILE

If you aren't very clear on your goals, or about how graduate school fits into your plans, you may want to delay applying for awhile. And, if you are really "burned out" on studying and academic efforts, you may want to take some time to recharge your batteries. Finally, practically speaking, working for awhile after graduating can provide some financial resources (providing you do some careful saving) that will ease the financial burden of grad school. Although some aid is available to support graduate education, it is still expensive, particularly if you go full-time.

One issue that concerns many undergraduates is: If I don't go to grad school right out of C.C., will I ever go? The data suggests that the answer to that question is -- "Yes, if you decide in the future that grad school forms an important part of your career plan (and you are properly prepared), you will almost certainly go on." On average, about 20-30% of C.C. alumni/ae head for grad school within two years of completing their degree at C.C. Over the long run, it appears that another 10-15% (or more -- the data are hard to track down) go on to graduate programs.

OTHER OPTIONS

If you think you want to go on, but are uncertain that now is the right time, check out your other options. Some schools do offer deferred admissions, so that you can apply now, but not actually enter the program for a year (or so) in the future. Some schools may offer other creative alternatives, so it is a good idea to find out what all of your choices are, before making a final decision about when to go. The best plan is to weigh the pros and cons of going directly ahead to school vs. waiting awhile. Get as much information as you can, from as many sources as you can, then decide what's right for you.

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HOW DO I CHOOSE THE SCHOOL THAT'S RIGHT FOR ME?

Once you have decided you are ready to go on to graduate school, you will need to choose a school. As of 1990, there were over 250 graduate schools in the U.S. that offer the Ph.D., hundreds of professional schools that offer advanced degrees such as the M.B.A., M.D., and D.D.M., and numerous programs that offer specialized Master's degrees like the MIM (Master's of International Management offered by Thunderbird), the MIBS (Master's of International Business Studies offered by several schools), and others.

GENERAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PROGRAMS

It is important to know that not all schools will offer programs in the discipline you want to study, nor are all schools that do offer such programs equally "good." Undergraduates are often -- not surprisingly -- somewhat naive about the nature of graduate school programs. Interestingly, while you may recognize that certain medical schools or law schools are better than others (or at least, are more prestigious), you may not understand that such differences also occur between schools offering other kinds of graduate programs. And, programs and schools differ not only in prestige, but in the actual nature of the programs in a given field. As an example, Harvard Law and Yale Law schools are equally prestigious schools -- and, both are obviously law schools. Yet, their methods of training are distinctly different. If you are considering these schools, you need to know what those differences are, and how they match your own learning style and preferences.

Similar distinctions are found among graduate programs in all fields. It is your job to identify the nature of various programs to better inform your decision-making process. It is essential that you spend time considering what criteria are important to you in selecting an appropriate program, and gathering information on various programs to learn how well they do or don't meet your criteria.

HOW "GOOD" A PROGRAM SHOULD I SHOOT FOR?

One thing you will need to decide upon is what "level" -- in terms of prestige and difficulty of admissions -- of programs to apply to. If you are a top-flight student, with an excellent GPA, test scores, and letters of recommendation, you will probably have a fairly wide range of choices of the best programs in your field. If your credentials are not quite as strong, you will need to realistically evaluate the expectations of various programs, and apply to good programs to which you can reasonably expect to be admitted.

HOW MANY PROGRAMS SHOULD I APPLY TO?

You should discuss this question with faculty who are knowledgeable about the area of graduate study you want to pursue. Because applications are expensive, it is unlikely that you will have the time, energy, or financial resources to apply to dozens of programs -- nor will you want to, if you have done your homework beforehand. You should, however, plan to apply to several programs, rather than "putting all your eggs in one basket." Occasionally a student will only apply to one or two programs, and when rejected by those, has no alternatives available. Basically, all students should select several potential programs, including some acceptable "back-ups" if you are not accepted at your first- or second-choice schools.

GIVEN THE CHOICE, GO FOR THE "GOLD"

A key piece of advice on selecting a program is this: Apply to the very best programs that you think you are realistically competitive for. Sometimes, students sell themselves short, and apply to mediocre or poor-quality programs that they know they can easily get into -- solely to prevent the possibility of being rejected. It is <u>essential</u> that you understand that the kind of graduate school you attend will have a very direct bearing on the kinds of career opportunities you will have after graduating. So, while concerns about being rejected are certainly something you need to consider, you shouldn't let such concerns deter you from applying to good programs for which you are qualified.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A PROGRAM

There are many factors to consider when selecting a school. Some are listed here, and others will occur to you. It is extremely important to remember that you are selecting a program and a school, just as much as the program and school will be selecting you. Just as you made a considered choice about attending C.C. rather than attending other undergraduate schools to which you could have been accepted, you need to make a considered choice about graduate programs. Some important factors you should consider and weigh when selecting a program are listed below. And, Appendix B provides a system for keeping track of how well the programs you are considering meet each of the criteria that are important to you.

QUALITY OF PROGRAM

Reputation of the School

Probably the single most important criterion to consider is the quality of the overall program and of instruction. At the graduate level, "quality" is measured by a number of different factors. One of these is the general reputation of the school -- Harvard is obviously far better-known than, say, Central State University. In addition to the general reputation of the school, you need to consider the reputation of the particular department or program in which you are interested. To get a sense of the school's reputation, you can consult some of the graduate school directories in the Career Center. If you turn to the popular press, each year "U.S. News & World Report" publishes an issue that ranks the top schools in several professional fields. To find out about the prestige of particular departments, you should talk to faculty here at C.C. who are in the discipline in which you plan to pursue your graduate studies. Those faculty members can tell you which programs are well-thought-of, and which are not. You might learn that you would be wise to choose a well-known program in your discipline at a somewhat lesser-known school, over a poorly-thought-of program at a well-known school.

Reputation of the Faculty

Other factors related to program quality have to do with the reputation of the faculty at the graduate institution. It is very helpful (in terms of your future) to enter a program with highly-respected scholars in their field. How do you find out how prestigious the faculty are? One way is to get a list of the faculty members' names in the department in which you are interested, then run a quick search through the literature in your field. Are these people actively publishing, and presenting at conferences? Is their work cited by other scholars working in the same field? Are they names you've run across in your own studies here at C.C.?

Accessibility of Faculty

Equally important, you need to try to determine how accessible those faculty are to graduate students. A program may be filled with internationally-known scholars, but none of them ever meet or work with graduate students. Accessibility of faculty is extremely important in terms of your own future success. You can often get valuable information about these issues from graduate students already in the department. Typically, if you call a department, and explain that you are potentially interested in their program, they can provide the names of graduate students who would be willing to talk with you about it. Follow up, and call those students. They can often give you the "inside scoop" that isn't available from the department's or school's literature.

Admission Standards

Another important factor has to do with the program's admission standards. Are they taking everyone who applies, or are they selective? If they are selective, what are the criteria they consider important in selecting their students? At what level, and by whom, are selections made?

Program Accreditation

It is essential to know by whom the program is accredited. You do not want to earn a degree from a program that is not properly accredited, for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the most important is that if you are in a professional program (e.g., in dentistry, in mental health) that is not accredited, you might be unable to gain certification or licensure to practice your profession after graduation. If you are unclear about what kinds of accreditation are important in your future career field, find out from faculty here, and/or by writing to state accreditation boards in your field of interest. Information about accreditation is available in a variety of indexes of graduate programs in the Career Center, and in the literature published by the institutions themselves.

TYPE OF PROGRAM

You probably came to Colorado College for a lot of reasons, but it's pretty likely that at least one of those reasons involved the Block Plan -- and how the block system fits with your own preferred learning style. Just as you chose Colorado College because of the style of its academic program, you will also want to choose a graduate program that matches your style as closely as possible. You also need to consider the following factors:

Program Requirements

Requirements in graduate programs -- even in the very same academic discipline -- vary considerably in different institutions. For example, in graduate programs in the social sciences, while one school may require a great many hours of course-work combined with a little research experience, another school may only require a handful of core graduate courses and a great deal of research involvement. You need to know what courses and other learning experiences (e.g., internships, field experiences, etc.) are required to complete the graduate degree you are contemplating. All of these requirements affect the amount of time required to complete the program, and may affect your choice of one program over another.

Time to Complete the Program

One very important thing to find out is the average length of time required to complete the program. It is pretty obvious that a Master's degree should take less time to complete than a Ph.D. However, there is a lot of variation in the length of time required to complete the very same degree in different programs. For example, some graduate programs might require only 2 years to complete a Master's in a particular field, while other programs might take 3 years or more to complete that same degree. Similarly, length to complete a Ph.D. in a particular field might range as much as 4 years at one school to 12 years (yes, that's 12!) at another. And, be sure to find out not only what the "official literature" tells you, but inquire about how long students in the program have actually taken to complete their degrees. It's not very helpful to be told that one "can" complete the degree in 4 years, then learn that no-one has finished it in less than 7 years in the history of the department!

Number of Students Who Finish

You also need to know the number of students who do complete the degree program in which you're interested each year. Just as it's not very useful to know how quickly one can theoretically finish the degree, it's not very useful to know how many students could finish the degree each year. You want to enter a program where students do - - successfully -- complete their degrees. While you don't want to get your degree from a degree-mill that will automatically graduate anyone who will pay the tuition, you do want a program that offers you a reasonable chance of success at finishing your degree in some reasonable length of time.

OTHER INSTITUTIONAL FEATURES

It is pretty likely that your decision to come to Colorado College was at least partly influenced by its beautiful location. Similarly, you may want to think carefully about the locations of the various programs you are considering. During your graduate school years, you will be living in the local community to a much greater extent than was true during your four years at C.C., so its size and nature (e.g., a large metropolis vs. a small rural area) should be considered carefully. You also need to consider the size of the institution at large, and probably even more important, the size of the department you plan to enter. Your Colorado College experience is closely related to its relatively small size, which provides for a fairly intimate, personal community and general atmosphere. Do you want to continue your education in a similar institution or department, or are you ready for a change? Both small departments and large ones have their relative advantages and disadvantages. Small departments may offer a higher degree of collegiality, but fewer course selections and fewer opportunities to engage in research. Large departments may have more resources and more opportunities, but a greater likelihood of you as an individual -- unless you are highly assertive -- getting "lost in the shuffle." And, consider the composition of the faculty and graduate student groups in the department. You will be spending a lot of time working with these people in ways that are different from your experiences as an undergraduate, and you need to think about how important it is to you that those persons are diverse or similar in terms of gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, academic backgrounds, age, sexual orientation, religious orientation, etc.

OTHER RESOURCES

You might also want to evaluate some of the following institutional resources, since strengths or weaknesses in these areas can affect your success as a graduate student: How good is the library? Although computer access to information has made this a less critical question in recent years than it might have been 10 years ago, you want to ensure that the schools you are considering do have good library facilities -- lack of such facilities can make completing a thesis or dissertation incredibly difficult. If you are going into a program in science or medicine, how modern and complete are the laboratories and equipment? If you are going into a program in the arts, you may need to evaluate how good their collections, galleries, and/or performing arts facilities are. Given a choice, it is

preferable to go to a school that has state-of-the-art resources, to ensure that you acquire the essential skills and knowledge in that field.

Also find out what kinds of support services the school offers. Do they have good health care facilities, or do you have to provide your own (often expensive) insurance and find your own doctor? Is health care available for both you and your partner or spouse, and/or for your other dependents? Do they provide counselling, or is that another resource you must locate on your own if you need it? If you have children, is there a good day-care or preschool program available for young children, and/or good local schools available for older children? Are there any programs to provide career services to your partner or spouse, if that is desirable?

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST, AND HOW CAN I PAY FOR IT?

Since it is fairly likely that you will personally be footing most of the bill for your graduate education, you will want to check very carefully on the costs associated with the program. You should know that graduate school: "(a) costs more than undergraduate education (as a general rule); (b) often imposes a heavy debt burden (possibly adding to the debt you are already carrying); (c) usually has less financial aid available than is available at undergraduate institutions; and (d) usually makes working your way through (at a full-time job) unadvisable (Greene & Minton, 1989, p. 150). However, you shouldn't automatically assume that you won't be able to afford graduate school -- there are a number of sources of aid that are available to help with costs, several of which are described below. What you do need to do is engage in a realistic evaluation of costs and of available resources.

BASIC COSTS

In order to determine whether you can meet the costs of a graduate education, you need to find out a number of things, including: (1) What the current tuition is, and how frequently and at what rate it has risen in the past five years or so. (2) Whether the school provides any housing for graduate students, and if so, both current costs and cost history (i.e., increases over the past few years). Since only a few schools do provide graduate housing, it is more likely that you will be living off-campus, so you will need to check on the cost of living in the area. (3) Costs for local transportation, especially if you won't be living on campus. Don't forget additional transportation costs associated with going to required field placements, if that is part of the program requirement. (4) Costs for books, manuals, lab/technical equipment, art supplies, and other instructional aids may be considerably higher in graduate school than they were at C.C. How much of this are you required to pay for, and how much (if any) is provided by the department? (5) Are there residency requirements tied to tuition and costs? After investigating each program in which you are potentially interested, you should be able to generate an approximate total yearly cost for each program.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

There are three basic kinds of financial support available to support graduate education. They are: (a) education-related salaries, typically in the form of teaching or research assistantships, but sometimes including administrative assistantships and dormitory or counselling assistantships; (b) outright grants and fellowships; and (c) government or institutional loans or loans from private sources. Not all of these kinds of support are equally available in all schools, nor to all students, so you must again do some homework on what is available from the programs that interest you.

Assistantships

When support is available, it is most typically in the form of an "RA" or a "TA" awarded directly from the department in which you are doing your graduate work. An "RA" is a "Research Assistant," while a "TA" is a "Teaching Assistant." As an RA, you would typically assist with the research of a faculty member -- and sometimes, you will be able to piggyback onto that research project in ways that will benefit you, in terms of developing your own line of research and/or related publications. If you are a TA, you will usually assist with one or more sections of an undergraduate course; this assistance may include facilitating discussion groups, writing exam questions, and/or grading undergraduates' papers or exams. Both RA and TA positions typically require a commitment of about 10 to 20 hours per week.

Assistantships (like Hall Director positions) are sometimes available through the school's Residential Life Division. In addition, there are sometimes administrative assistantships available, particularly at larger institutions. The graduate school office (rather than the department) can give you information on who to contact about these, if they are available.

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Fellowships & Grants

Some departments and some institutions also offer fellowships, scholarships, or training grants. These are usually straight monetary awards that do not require work-hour commitments, and they are typically awarded on the basis of academic merit. However, no matter how good your undergraduate record is, you can't count on such fellowships, as they are becoming ever scarcer in the graduate world today. It is worth your while to carefully investigate resources like The Graduate Scholarship Book, Grants for Graduate Students, The Grants Register, and others that are available in Tutt Library. These books list both large and small grants and fellowships that are available across the U.S. It is worthwhile to apply for even fairly small fellowships, since you can sometimes put together a substantial "package" for yourself from several sources.

Loans

Another general source of financial support includes government (state and/or federal) loan programs. There are some government-sponsored fellowships (scholarships that do not require repayment) as well as government loans. Two of the better-known current loan programs are the Carl Perkins National Direct Student Loan Program, and the Stafford Guaranteed Student Loan Program. Most loans will be administered through the institution's financial aid office rather than through the academic department, so you need to be sure to contact both places.

Jobs

A final source of income during graduate school is from jobs, which come in many forms -- some obtained through sources outside the school, and some connected with various academic programs. Some law schools, for example, now offer job/internship programs that are affiliated with the law school, so that you can complete both coursework and paid career-related work at the same time. Some medical schools also make provisions for employment affiliated with health centers or hospitals. Many institutions also have work-study programs that provide part-time employment during the academic year, and full- or part-time employment during summers.

A FINAL POINT

Unless you are in the fortunate -- and unusual -- position of having unlimited financial resources at your disposal, you will need to ask up front about what kinds of options are available. Although you may be concerned that questions about financial support will appear inappropriate or tacky, or harm your chances of being admitted, those worries are unfounded. Departments and institutions will be happy to tell you what, if any, monies are available to help support graduate students. However, they won't know you need the information unless you ask -- so be sure to do so! When you call or write for information about the institution's graduate program in general, and about the specific departmental program(s) in which you are interested, ask what kinds of RA, TA, loan, fellowship, training grant, and other opportunities are available, as well as what the qualifications are, and the (at least approximate) amount of aid typically awarded.

INS AND OUTS OF THE APPLICATION AND ADMISSIONS PROCESS

This section briefly describes the overall application process, then considers three practical areas of concern that are often on the minds of students who are considering graduate school: admissions, required tests, and letters of recommendation.

THE GENERAL PROCESS

First, you will need to learn through your research what the specific application requirements are for the programs in which you are interested. You will need to obtain and complete whatever application forms are required, following all instructions to the letter. Applicants are frequently rejected because they failed to allocate the time and effort needed to complete the application exactly as instructed. Take the time, and do it right! You will also need to: (a) visit the C.C. Registrar, to request that your undergraduate transcript be sent to the institutions you are applying to, (b) register for and take the appropriate standardized tests, and (c) visit faculty (and/or other appropriate people) to discuss and request letters of recommendation.

ALL ABOUT GRADUATE ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

Admissions Requirements

All graduate schools and departments have some kind of admissions requirements. Usually these will include a minimum GPA, particular scores or score ranges on one or more standardized tests (e.g., the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT, etc.), official transcripts from your undergraduate institution, letters of recommendation, a thoughtful application essay, and a nonrefundable application fee. Some schools will also ask for samples of previous academic work, some will require the completion of particular courses in an academic area, or completion of a particular major (although this is becoming less common), and some will require a personal interview. Where an interview is required, applicants will typically have to pay for their travel and other expenses themselves.

The amount of weight given to each of these factors will vary by program type, and by school. For example, admission to most law schools is based primarily on GPA and LSAT scores. Admission to other kinds of programs might be more dependent on your letters of recommendation and application essay. Typically, the more selective an institution or department is, the more challenging their admissions standards will be.

Finding Out About a Program's Admissions Standards

Many students wonder how tough it is to get into a good graduate program. Realistically, competition is tough everywhere, and your qualifications will be carefully compared with those of other potential admits. Typically, students with high GPAs, excellent test scores, and wonderful letters of recommendation will be admitted to very good programs, although perhaps not to all of the programs to which they apply. Students with solid GPAs, good test scores, and excellent letters of recommendation may have difficulty gaining admission to the "top 10" schools in their field, but may be admitted to solid public university programs. The important thing is to carefully evaluate what the standards are for each program, and how well you match them.

How do you find out what the admissions standards are? There are several manuals available in the Career Center library and in Tutt Library that briefly describe at least some of the admissions requirements for many programs. However, since admissions standards do change (and in some cases, are not completely reported in these manuals), your best bet is to write directly to the programs in which you are interested, request a copy of their admissions standards, and a copy of the admissions profile of the most recent entering graduate class. This will tell you what you need to know to determine whether or not you are realistically a candidate for admission to each program.

THE APPLICATION ESSAY

You will also have to invest considerable time, energy, and effort in writing the best possible application essay (sometimes called a "candidate statement" or "statement of professional intent"). If the program to which you are applying does require such an essay, you may be sure that they consider it very seriously as a criterion for admission, and it is essential that you also consider it seriously. You should consult with faculty on how best to approach this task, and get their feedback on one or more drafts. In addition, the Career Center has several books on writing such essays, and the Writing Center will be happy to assist you with polishing them. These personal statements are used by the graduate schools not only to evaluate your writing ability, but to evaluate your commitment to (and to some degree, understanding of) the field you wish to pursue. They are typically not the place to be cute or creative, but to show careful thoughtfulness about who you are, what your goals are, and how those goals are connected to the graduate pursuits you are considering.

REQUIRED TESTS

What Are They?

The commonest standardized tests required for admission to various kinds of graduate programs in the U.S. are the Graduate Records Exam (GRE), the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Professional schools more typically require the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), and the Dental Admission Test (DAT). In case you don't already know this, the deadlines for registering to take these tests are far in advance (usually several months) of the actual test dates, and most are given only a few times a year.

Which Ones Do I Take?

Based on your research, you should know exactly which tests are required by the various programs you plan to apply to. Don't assume that because you plan to apply to programs in the same academic discipline that the requirements will be the same. For example, some graduate programs in biology require -- in addition to the "general" GRE -- the GRE "subject test" in biology; other graduate programs in biology don't require the subject test. It is both expensive and exhausting to take tests that you won't need to apply to programs, but equally costly not to have taken tests that you do need to have taken. Check this carefully, then prepare for and make arrangements to take the tests that are required by the programs you plan to apply to.

When Should I Take Them?

A common question we hear from students is, "When should I take the _____ (particular test)?" The best answer is that you need to take it early enough that your scores can be sent in time to meet the deadlines for the programs to which you are applying. Some professional program advisors suggest taking some of these tests a year or so before you plan to apply to a professional program. For example, pre-med students may be advised to take the MCAT in the spring of their junior year if they are planning on applying the following year to medical schools.

It is helpful to know that most test scores are considered valid for approximately 4-5 years (depending on the test), so it's fine to take the tests while still in college, even if you don't plan on applying to graduate schools for a bit. Later, you can request the testing service to send your scores to institutions that you are applying to. Some students prefer to go ahead and take the tests while at C.C., since they feel some of the material tested will be "fresher in their minds." Other students prefer to wait until they are clearer on exactly what kinds of programs they will be applying to, and when they will be applying.

How Do I Get Ready?

Another common question we hear is, "How can I get ready for the tests?" Again, it would be a good idea to ask for faculty members' thoughts about this, but the most frequent recommendation in books that address this question is -- preparation, preparation, preparation! That preparation can take a variety of forms. One method is to enroll in courses like those offered by the Stanley Kaplan Educational Center (the so-called "Kaplan Courses"). A second method is to purchase guides to taking the various tests which include sample tests, then to work through those guides carefully and thoroughly, following instructions for timing the sample tests, etc. A third option is to obtain copies of actual past tests directly from the test producers; instructions for how to do this are in Appendix C of this booklet. Whatever option(s) you choose, develop a specific plan for preparing, and follow it rigorously!

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Many representatives of graduate schools indicate that candidates' letters of recommendation are what make or break them in terms of admissions -- yet many potential graduate students don't appear to understand the importance of these letters. While good letters alone won't get you into a program, without them you almost certainly will not gain admission.

How Many, and From Whom?

The first two questions most students ask about recommendations are, "How many do I need?" and "Should all of my recommendations be from professors?" The answer to both questions is "It depends." Different graduate schools will require different numbers of recommendations, with the standard range between 3 and 5. Similarly, whether or not your recommenders should all be faculty members depends partly on the requirements of the particular schools to which you are applying, on whether you have engaged in other career-related work (e.g., internships or summer jobs) in which your supervisor could provide an appropriate recommendation, on whether you have completed research projects which a knowledgeable professional might comment upon, and on many other factors. As a very general rule, most (if not all) of your recommendations should come from faculty members, but it does depend on the requirements of the specific schools and on your own background.

How Do You Actually Get Them?

The groundwork for getting good recommendations actually needs to be laid throughout your undergraduate career. Hopefully, in the communal atmosphere provided here at C.C., you have gotten to

know several of your professors well enough that they are able to comment knowledgeably and positively on your abilities and your potential. If you have not developed such relationships, you need to work now on doing so. This is not to suggest that you should brown-nose faculty members, or misrepresent yourself or your affection for her or his class to a professor, but that you engage in a genuine conversation about your involvement in that person's class or research or both, and how that involvement is related to your goals and future plans. (You may also want to read the Career Center booklet, "Credential Services.")

Talk to potential recommenders about what you want to do, and why you want to do it. Ask if they feel they know your work and abilities well enough to write a letter of recommendation for you, and if they would be willing to do so. If a professor indicates reservations, thank him or her politely, and search for an alternative. A weak or lackluster recommendation can harm your case far more than advance it. If the professor agrees to write a letter for you, you should provide her or him with a statement of your goals, objectives, and purpose (related to your application), a curriculum vitae or resume, the recommendation forms provided by the graduate schools (if any), stamped envelopes, and a list of names and addresses of schools, and their deadlines. (Note: if you don't have a curriculum vitae or a resume, you might want to pick up the relevant booklets, "Curriculum Vitae and Related Letters" or "Resume Writing" from the Career Center.)

DEADLINES

As you research each institution of potential interest to you, keep a file noting their admissions requirements and their deadlines for application. Although deadlines vary from school to school, most are in early January or slightly later. Some schools do, however, have deadlines as early as late November, so be sure to check carefully.

Next to the absolute necessity that all application materials are filled out clearly, completely, and accurately, the most important piece of advice in terms of applying is -- get your materials in on time!!! Since you won't have direct control over pieces of your application, like transcripts, letters of recommendation, and test scores, it will be essential for you to calendar reminders for yourself to check with the appropriate offices or people to ensure that those things were sent. Sometimes documents do get lost in the mail, and you need to know as quickly as possible whether things that should have arrived at the grad school by a particular time have or haven't gotten there. Check with the graduate school at least 3 weeks before their final deadline and ask whether your materials have been received; they'll be happy to check and tell you whether there is anything missing from your file. If something is missing, you will still have time to ask the original sender to send a duplicate. Remember -- graduate schools tend to be extremely rigid about deadlines -- if all of your materials aren't there on time, you may be automatically eliminated from consideration.

DEALING WITH REJECTION

It is important to remember that rejection is not -- even though it might feel like it -- the end of the world. Even the very best students often get rejected by one or more of the programs they apply to. There are several things you can do if you are rejected by a program in which you are strongly interested. First, try to identify exactly why you weren't accepted -- call the school, and talk to someone on the admissions committee, if possible. If it is clear that your academic record was not as strong as it might have been -- for example, you only have a few advanced courses in the discipline in which you want to do graduate work, or you only performed at a mediocre level in some of those courses -- you may want to take (in summer school, or at another institution after graduation) some additional coursework, focussing on doing as well as possible in those courses. Some schools report that students who complete such additional coursework with strong academic performance after graduation vastly improve their chances of admission on reapplication.

Second, you might also want to consider doing an internship or volunteer work in an area related to your chosen graduate school field. Relevant experience is becoming increasingly valued (and often required) by graduate programs, so the more you have, the more desirable you may be as an applicant. Finally, if you are rejected because there were simply too many highly-qualified applicants (and you are one of those highly-qualified applicants), you may want to re-apply the following year. Most admissions reps report that re-applying after having been rejected once is typically not seen negatively, and may even be seen as a positive sign of your interest in and commitment to the program.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A FINAL WORD OF ADVICE

What you need to do right now is collect information. That means talking with people, reading in the library, and finding out as much as possible to help you make the best-informed decision that is possible. Appendix A below will help you focus on specific questions that you need to find or develop answers for, and suggests strategies for finding the answers to those questions. Appendix D lists some of the resource materials available in the Career Center. Talk to everyone, read everything, and enjoy the process -- yes, it's stressful, but can also be one of the most rewarding things you will ever do. Good luck, and let us know how else we can help you!

Appendix A
Questions & Issues to Explore

Throughout the next few months (or years, if you are starting this process very early in your undergraduate career), you need to collect a wide variety of information relevant to the decision-making process. You should do some reading in the Career Center library, in Tutt, and in a variety of other places where you can get information about careers and about graduate and professional programs. You should also be talking with a variety of people, including faculty, advisors, alumni/ae, counselors, friends, and other people who have the kinds of careers in which you may be interested. You may also want to interview with graduate school recruiters who come to campus, consult books, articles, and school bulletins, write to individual departments and to schools asking for information, and actually visit some graduate school campuses where possible.

The questions in this Appendix have been organized to correspond with the main sections of this booklet. As you talk with people and read graduate school literature and information, try to develop clear and concrete answers to the questions listed in the booklet, and to the other questions that will occur to you. We encourage you to write down the answers to the various questions as you explore them, both as a way to chart your progress, and as a way of checking your understanding of these issues. In addition, you might want to discuss your findings and answers with faculty members to get their feedback. And, you may want to ask the Career Center staff for help in locating relevant information that you need.

INTRODUCTION

Wallace, Wagner, & Siska (1990) have suggested that people interested in graduate school should keep in mind the following questions. You might want to try to answer them now, and again after you have done further self-assessment, reading, and/or interviews with some of the people listed in the section above.

- What do you want to do with your life?
- What are both your short- and long-range goals?
- Do you feel your goals are realistic?
- Is graduate study necessary for you to accomplish your goals?
- Do you know where to get advice and help in career planning?
- How will graduate or professional school affect your future?
- Are you personally ready to tackle graduate school?
- Do you have the necessary ability and interest to be successful in graduate school?
- Has your academic training adequately prepared you to face the demands of graduate school?
- Why are you planning to attend graduate school?
- What do you hope to gain from the experience?
- Are you choosing graduate school to delay the decision about what kind of career or job you want?
- Are you choosing graduate school because you feel you have no other options?
- Have you investigated career opportunities available to you at every educational level?
- Are you willing to invest the time, effort, and expense to undertake a program that requires prolonged concentration in an academic setting? (p. 107).

Some Ideas:

- Come to the Career Center to get names of recent C.C. alumni/ae who are attending, or who have recently attended graduate school. Have an information interview with them, discussing issues like:
  1) How did you find grad school to be different from life at C.C.? How was it similar?
  2) What were the hardest adjustments for you? Why? Are there things a student can do while still at C.C. to better prepare to cope with those kinds of problems or issues?
  3) What do/did you like best about grad school? What do/did you like least?
  4) What would you have done differently in making grad school decisions, and why?
  5) What other advice would you have for me as I contemplate whether or not to go to grad school?
- Talk with faculty members in the discipline you are considering doing graduate work in; what would they advise, and why? What kind of graduate work did they do, and how has it meshed with their goals?

- Talk to members of professions that you are interested in potentially pursuing; find out both about their careers and their career-preparation paths; did they need a graduate degree to get where they are? How has having/not having a graduate degree helped/hurt them? What do they wish they had done differently, and why?
- If you haven't done it yet, consider completing the "Career Exploration" booklet in the Career Center; it will help you determine what some of your career options are, and identify what kinds of training/preparation are required for some of those options.
- Talk with C.C. alumni/ae who are currently employed in fields that you are interested in; find out about their educational histories, and how they feel their choices about attending or not attending graduate school have affected their careers.

A LITTLE SELF-ASSESSMENT

You need to be able to answer the following questions about yourself, honestly and completely:

- What kind of student have you been as an undergraduate? What are your particular areas of academic strength and weakness? How might these have an effect in graduate school?
- What appeals to you about academia? What haven't you liked, and why?
- What kinds of learning experiences have you had (e.g., internships) outside of the classroom that have affected your interests and academic goals?
- What other interests, skills, and values are important to you that may influence your decision?
- Why are you considering graduate school at this time and what are your eventual goals?
- Are there other people in your life who need to be considered in making this decision? How will it affect them?

Some Ideas:
You may need to come to grips with some uncomfortable truths. For example, when assessing one's own academic abilities, there is often a tendency to overestimate or underestimate them. Modest people often don't give themselves full credit for their accomplishments -- this can lead to problems in "aiming too low" in selecting programs, or even deciding (incorrectly) that graduate school is not for you. On the other hand, an overestimate of your abilities may lead you to apply to programs which are unlikely to admit you, leading to disappointment and discouragement. In thinking about this issue, and the others listed above, you must attempt to be as honest with yourself and about yourself as you are able to be. To facilitate the process of self-assessment, consider some of the following options:

- Complete the Career Center booklet "Self-Directed Self-Assessment"
- Complete one or more of the following: MBTI, Strong Interest Inventory, Campbell Interests & Skills Survey
- Talk with others who know you well, and ask them for their perceptions (but remember, they only see the part of you that you reveal to them; you still know more about you than they do)

WHEN SHOULD I GO?

Answer the following questions:

- Are you personally ready to tackle graduate school? Why do you think so/not?
- Do you know what the actual financial costs of graduate school are? Do you currently have the personal financial resources required to meet these costs? If not, what are your alternatives?
- Do you have the energy, patience, and drive to continue with several more years of school, having just finished (or almost finished) four years here at C.C.?

Some Ideas:

- Talk (some more) to people in the career areas in which you are interested about their educational paths; did they go to school immediately, or wait awhile, and how do they now evaluate their decision
- Make a written list of "pros" and "cons" regarding going immediately vs. postponing school for two to three (or three to five) years

- Write to schools that potentially interest you and find out their policies on deferred admissions
- If you decide to postpone for a little while, but do plan on going to grad school at some point in the next 5 years, you may want to go ahead and take the GRE or other standardized test(s) now, since those scores are considered valid for several years; you may want to check and determine exactly how long those scores are valid for; also, check with faculty advisors for their advice on when to take the appropriate standardized test(s)

HOW DO I CHOOSE THE SCHOOL THAT'S RIGHT FOR ME?

Answer the following to provide a starting place for your further explorations:

- What are the key characteristics you hope to find in a graduate school, and why are these characteristics important to you?
- Are there any schools or programs that you have an interest in at this time? If not, do you need to do some more exploring, or should you consider options other than continuing on to graduate school at this point in time?
- How important to you are location and size in selecting an institution?
- What other kinds of institutional resources are important to you, and why?
- What kinds of students and faculty members do you wish to work with, and why? What kinds of characteristics are undesirable in fellow students and in faculty and why?

Some Ideas:

- Talk with faculty (preferably in the discipline or field in which you are interested) about their graduate school experiences, and their suggestions; the best sources of advice about identifying the best graduate programs in a given discipline are usually the faculty in that discipline
- Use the Career Center's Alumni/ae Network list, and call and talk with alumni/ae who have completed graduate programs in the fields and at the schools in which you are potentially interested
- Interview professionals outside of C.C. who are pursuing the kinds of careers in which you are interested; find out where they did their graduate work, and their evaluations of and advice about the programs they completed
- Read through some of the graduate school directories in the Career Center to find out about schools that offer the kinds of programs in which you are interested
- Go to Tutt, and read the catalogues (on microfiche) of those schools that potentially interest you; be sure to read the graduate catalogue if available for the school -- the undergraduate catalogue won't tell you what you need to know
- If you can afford it, visit the campuses of the schools which interest you; talk with faculty and with other graduate students in the department that interests you
- As you gather information, complete the checklist in Appendix B -- Characteristics of Programs I'm Considering

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

When evaluating your ability to meet financial costs of attending graduate school, you will need to realistically evaluate both your own present circumstances, and gather information about what kinds of aid are available from the programs that interest you. You should be able to answer these questions:

- What kinds of realistic financial restraints will affect your choice of programs?
- How important is financial aid in making your decision?
- If seeking an RA or TA (or other assistantship), how much time will be required? Will you also be permitted to carry a full course-load? What are the implications for how long it will take you to complete your degree?
- Exactly how much (if any) of the tuition, fees, and other costs will be paid from your TA, RA, fellowship, or other source of aid, and how much will you have to pay out of pocket?
- If you receive financial support, is it year-round, or only during the academic year? Are other sources of support available during the summer (since graduate students typically continue their studies during the summer as well)?
- How much of whatever financial awards are available is taxable income? Some schools have arrangements with the government so that, for example, an RA or a TA salary is considered non-taxable income, and the net result is more actual money available to help you meet costs.
- If assistantships are available, what impact will that have on your ability to develop relationships with faculty members? what impact will it have on your ability to complete your own research? what impact is it likely to have on your long-term future plans (e.g., in terms of possible recommendations, perceptions of future employers, etc.)?

Some Ideas:

- Having identified several schools that look interesting, write to them and ask for a copy of their graduate catalogue, information on financial aid, and information on applying; also write directly to the department in which you are interested, and ask for information on the program, the faculty, courses, etc. Remember to check with both the department, and with the institution at large (usually through the Graduate Programs Office) about available sources of financial support.

References

Green, H. & Minton, R. (1989). Beyond the Ivy Wall: 10 Essential Steps to Graduate School Admission. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Wallace, W., Wagner, C., & Siska, N. (1990). For Your Action: A Practical Job Search Guide for the Liberal Arts Student. Bloomington, IN: Arts & Sciences Career Planning and Placement Center, Indiana University.

Appendix B
Characteristics of Programs I'm Considering

Across the top of this chart, on the slanted lines, list the characteristics of programs that are important to you, in their order of importance. For example, if location, faculty prestige, and small student body size are important to you, they would go on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd lines across the top. Down the left side of the chart, list the names of the programs that potentially interest you. As you collect information about those programs, rank how well they meet your requirements for each characteristic listed above. When the chart is completed, you will have one systematic way of comparing potential programs.

Name of School															

Appendix C
Ordering Sample Tests

You can obtain actual copies of each of the major standardized tests as follows. The cost listed in parentheses following each item is the most recent cost information available at the time of writing of this booklet, and may no longer be accurate.

GRE

In the "GRE Bulletin of Information" (available in the Career Center) there is an order form that allows you to purchase three sample tests (these are complete copies of the "general" test) ($7); you can also obtain sample practice tests for each of the subject areas ($6 each).

GMAT

In the "GMAT Bulletin of Information" (available in the Career Center) you can obtain an order form for The Official Guide for GMAT Review, which contains three complete tests ($9.95).

LSAT

You can order The Official Guide to U.S. Law Schools: Prelaw Handbook from: Publications, LSAC/LSAS, Dept. 0-6, P.O. Box 63, Newtown, PA 18940; this Handbook contains a tryout LSAT. You can also get three additional sample tests in The Official LSAT Sample Test Book, available from LSAC/LSAS, P.O. Box 500-57, Newtown, PA 18940 ($14 for first three; 15 more sample tests available at $5 each).

MCAT

You can order the MCAT Student Manual from: Association of American Medical Colleges, Attn: Membership & Publication Orders, Suite 200, One Dupont Circle, N.W., Washington, DC 20036; this Manual provides a sample test ($7).

DAT

You can obtain samples of four DAT exams from the Division of Educational Measurements, American Dental Association, 211 East Chicago Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611 ($2).

Appendix D
Related Resources in the Career Center Library

Barron's Guide to Graduate Business Schools (1992)

Barron's Guide to Law Schools, 10th Ed. (1992)

Beyond the Ivy Wall - 10 Essential Steps to Graduate School Admission (1989)

Directory of Medical Schools Worldwide, 5th Edition (1991)

Gourman Report: Graduate and Professional Programs, 5th Edition (1989)

Graduate School and You - A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students (1989)

Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields (1986)

GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs 1990 & 1991 -- Life Sciences & Psychology

GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs 1990 & 1991 -- Arts & Humanities

GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs 1990 & 1991 -- Physical Sciences, Math & Engineering

GRE/CGS Directory of Graduate Programs 1990 & 1991 -- Social Sciences & Education

Guide to Graduate Studies in Economics, Agriculture, Public Administration. . . in the U.S. and Canada (1989)

Guide to MBA Programs (1992-94)

How to Write a Winning Personal Statement (1989)

Medical School Admissions Requirements (1992-93)

Official Guide to MBA Programs 1990-92, The (1990)

Peterson's Graduate Programs in the Biological & Agricultural Sciences (1991)

Peterson's Guides/Graduate & Professional Programs: An Overview (1991)

Peterson's Guides/Graduate Programs in the Humanities & Social Sciences (1991)

Peterson's Guides/Graduate Programs in Engineering & Applied Sciences (1991)

Peterson's Guides/Graduate Programs in the Physical Sciences & Mathematics (1991)

Peterson's Guides/Graduate Programs in Business, Education, Health, & Law (1991)

Peterson's Register of Higher Education (1991)

Write for Success: Preparing a Successful Medical School Application (1987)